

Luke 3: 1-14

Tough Love - #3 in a Series on Love

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This month our sermon topic is Love. Christmas is a season of love. In these weeks leading up to Christmas most of us are very much aware of the people that we love. We get cards and letters from relatives. As we read the words or study the pictures we recognize all the ties that bind us to our relatives or friends who have become like family. We re-connect with people and remember how much we have shared over the year and love's light is re-kindled in our hearts. In this season we also strive to be especially loving to everyone, even strangers, as the air is thick with affection. Whether it is searching for presents to convey our appreciation, striving to remember everyone we care for, extending greetings to colleagues, giving our friends the benefit of the doubt, wishing perfect strangers a merry Christmas. We are generous with good causes; we stop for Salvation Army workers, and tip musicians in the subway. In this season we allow ourselves to live in light of the angels who said – good will to all.

So, our parties and gifts are all guided by the Bible story about how God gave us the greatest gift anyone could give – the gift of human life. Giving a little life- was a gift of God's own self. God's extravagant generosity inspires our love to one another all year long but especially now.

In our series on love we have talked about how God's love inspires us. Today I want to think more about love- not just as a simple urge but a complex emotion. Each week I am looking at a different person in the Christmas story to see what they can tell us about love. Today we read about John the Baptist. We know John had incredible faith, but it is easy to

overlook his love for his people. Why? Because he was not gushy or sentimental. Neither was he warm and fuzzy. He was popular and charismatic to his healing services where people were baptized. But John also yelled at the people. If he thought they were mistaken or foolish he did not mince his words. He held them to a high standard. His was a different affection, something we call tough love today. It helps us to see a different quality of love. What can we learn from John for our lives today?

Firstly, **Real love sets high standards**. John the Baptist was hard on the people who came to the River Jordan. He had no patience with those who were going through the motions of faith, or seeking baptism for superstitious reasons, or turning out at worship because it was popular. He expected more because he loved his people and knew that God has so much more to offer us. Sometimes we get angry with people we love and that can be a good thing. We are angry because we think they are shallow, or making mistakes, or influenced by the wrong folks, or selling themselves short. Our anger is not always so bad; it can be a sign of our sense of their potential, or our frustration that they do not see what we see.

The modern concept of tough love was coined by Bill Milliken, an educator in 1968. His book was about setting high standards instead of low ones introduced a new way to treat teens dropping out of school or getting lost in the system that did not have strict enough standards. He introduced the notion that accountability is an important component in relationships with students or any relationship with someone you care about. Many studies have confirmed Milliken's theory that children are much more likely to develop maturity and responsibility- the kind that leads to real happiness if they experience the right balance of warmth and discipline. If the balance is off in either direction and they have a laissez faire, authoritarian, or disengaged family life it is harder to build good social skills or self-esteem. The author of one report said that "tough love is a combination of confidence, warmth and consistent discipline that matter most." Knowing that does not make it easier to achieve. In my experience, it is always a balancing act.

Now I want to be very clear that under no circumstances does tough love ever justify abuse. Tough love can be a misleading term if we forget that the emphasis is on the word love. Love should never be a form of control, or manipulation. It does not embarrass someone or demean them. Tough love takes people seriously and does not patronize them, or assume they are too weak to step up. Quite often by setting high standards people feel complimented. When we set boundaries people we love feel safe.

We learn with our children that often when we say no or re-direct them, they respond to our higher expectations. Often setting a limit is a gift to a person. Whether it is received as a gift you know in your bones that discipline is always a sign of respect. If you never say ‘no’ to the people you care about, because you love them so much, then your “yes” is not very valuable either.

Secondly, love is always a balance. We all have our own natural tendency when it comes to the way we love. Some of us are good at showing kindness. We reach out easily and naturally. We lead with a hug, or find the right gift. We have learned or we are blessed with the ability to show empathy. We hurt when someone else is hurt. We feel bad when people cry or we get worked up when we see injustice. For folks like us, setting limits may not come easily. When we discipline a child we worry that we have been too hard on them. We feel their pain. We second guess ourselves. That is just who we are.

Other people set boundaries more naturally. We are comfortable saying “No”, without looking back or second guessing the decision. Our ways to express our affection may be more practical. We find a concrete way to help someone. We don’t feel comfortable hugging but we care deeply. We may not be exuberant but we are reliable, responsible and we really ponder practically about what someone else might need. We are generous, but in a more measured way.

Love has a spectrum. Wherever we find ourselves on that spectrum it is important to remember that mature love includes a balance of empathy and practicality. If you lead with empathy, tough love may be really hard for you. If you are practical about affection it might be very hard to be sentimental. When you activate the other side of the spectrum you achieve a new balance and people notice. If you have a teacher or a coach who has been really hard on you and suddenly they pull you aside to reveal that they have high hopes for you and that is why they have been on your case, that softness combined with the discipline warms your heart because they have found this wonderful balance. In the same way if a parent who is usually permissive pulls you aside and tells you directly that they are worried about your behavior – you notice the shift immediately, and while you might not like it at first, over time it is a gift.

When Adam and Eve broke the rule of the garden, and ate of the one tree that God forbid, God was clear. There was a rule, and it had been breached. They had to leave the garden. But then God did this amazing thing for them; God sewed the first couple a set of clothes. The little piece of the story changes everything. God's love is balanced and complete. God sets standards and God sits up by a candle and sewing clothes. In the very first story of the Bible, God shows us the power of love when it is whole – strong and kind, clear and thoughtful – all at once.

Finally, tough love is not just a personal discipline. It is prophetic. John the Baptist identified personal hypocrisy but he also spoke out about society's problems. He loved life so much that he could not be still when he saw people getting hurt. He was an outspoken critic of his government. Tough love has been applied to AA programs and personal relationships, but Bill Milliken was also a social critic. A pioneer in the movement to help young people graduate from high school and go on to rewarding lives, he was tough on kids because he believed our schools were failing the poorest kids. Tough love insisted that school systems meet higher standards.

As I was listening to the news this weekend about the shooting at the Elementary School in Newtown CT where 20 children were murdered and 8 adults are left dead I thought about this sermon, I wondered what John the Baptist would say to us. No one knows, but chances are he would be blunt. Not unkind but blunt. In this season when we celebrate God's gift of a child-a little child of inestimable worth what is the message for us here? In this day when we recognize that Jesus's birth means that every child is precious, you cannot help but wonder how we got to this place.

How can you give a thoughtful sermon on tough love and remain silent about this most recent rampage? I heard a reporter who was asked to assess Newtown Ct and he said that it was a lovely affluent town, a café community. I thought about all our notions of what makes a place safe. Is it safe to go to the movies, or safe to listen to your congresswoman give a little speech in a parking lot? Is there any place where it is safe? One of our assumptions is that people can send their children to school without worries.

I might have addressed in the past, but didn't. When high school students were shot at Columbine, we prayed for them. When young adults were shot at Virginia Tech we prayed for them. When Gabriella Gifford was shot in the head doing her job at a town meeting we prayed. But I am tired of praying, and I believe the time has come to speak more boldly about the violence in our country that now makes it unsafe to go to kindergarten in Connecticut. In a country where hand guns are readily available and people with mental illness can get ready access to them, there are no safe communities. I think it is time that people of faith start to speak up.

If people of faith across the spectrum of religions banded together we could make a difference. If citizens who care say- Enough – we can turn this tide. In the absence of our strong voices setting limits on what we will allow, we are tolerating a world where we are paralyzed,

wondering when the next disaster will strike, which innocent victims we will be praying for. If we don't speak up who will? What is the disaster that will make us speak up? We baptized a little girl and we promised things. We owe her our best efforts to make this world a whole lot safer than it is right now.

One of you sent me an e-mail asking – Where is the hope in this? My answer- There is no hope unless we resolve that this will be the last gun massacre in our schools.